

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Easement Program Right for Flooded Cropland

Jason Johnson, Public Affairs Specialist, March 2010

When brothers Bob and John McCulley of Oakville purchased 184 acres of crop ground and timberland along the Iowa River floodplain five years ago they knew the land was susceptible to seep water and high river levels. But the events of June 2008 were beyond their worst nightmare.

A major river levee broke adjacent to their property, causing immediate flood damage to their land and well-documented devastation to the entire southeast Iowa region. This included the nearby town of Oakville, and the McCulley's family business, TriOak Foods – a fixture in the small town since 1951.

Areas of cropland and timber still have standing water, more than a year after the major flood event of 2008.



The McCulley brothers (Bob, left, and John, right) look at an aerial view of the land they have entered in to the EWP-Floodplain Easements with District Conservationist Drew DeLang.

What to do with flood-prone cropland

Many home and business owners around Oakville affected by the 2008 floods were assisted by state and federal government

agencies, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Similarly, many farmers with flooded cropland were approached by the U.S. Department of Agriculture

to retire their frequently-flooding bottomland from agricultural use through floodplain easements offered through the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program.

After the summer of 2008, the pressures of dealing with flood-prone, damaged cropland no longer made sense to the McCulleys. They accepted USDA's offer and are working toward enrolling all 184 acres in the EWP-Floodplain Easements. Administered by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the program pays selected landowners a one-time, fair market price for the land and all costs for restoring the land to its natural condition. About 120 acres of the McCulley property was row cropped, so NRCS will pay to restore that portion to a mix of native grasses. The other 64 acres will be left to timber. "We bought our land as an investment – to farm it and improve it from a conservation standpoint," said Bob. "Although we won't farm it any longer, I'm glad



Louisa County District Conservationist Drew DeLang views a wetland rush that has come up naturally since the Floods of 2008.

we signed up for this program. It makes sense for us and this land.”

The McCulleys will have some flexibility with the restored acres, according to NRCS District Conservationist Drew DeLang in Louisa County. “We want to meet the landowner’s goals and objectives for the property and meet the program’s goals and objectives, too,” said DeLang. He says, although NRCS only covers basic restoration costs, the landowner may enhance the land on their own as long as the work is in their new conservation plan. “We would like to use it for hunting and recreation,” said Bob. “Before the flood there was a lot of turkey activity out here. I don’t know if that will come back or not.”

The McCulleys intend to plant more trees to attract birds, such as cardinals and doves, and food plots to attract wildlife for hunting. (Any compatible use projects, such as food plots, will need to be approved through NRCS.)

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Iowa Flood Emergency Funding

Overall, 118 EWP-Floodplain Easement applications were selected for funding in Iowa after the 2008 floods, which cover 13,128 acres. In addition, 39 applications were selected for funding through the Emergency Watershed Protection Program’s floodplain easement option of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009. Those easement applications total nearly 5,000 acres of flood recovery.

EWP-Floodplain Easements Eligibility Requirements

To be eligible for enrollment in EWP-Floodplain Easements the land must:

- be located in a floodplain that includes cropland, pasture or timber. (Crop history is not a consideration for eligibility, although cropland fields receive a higher score during the ranking process.)
- be located within the watershed that is designated as eligible for participation. A minimum of 65 percent of the acreage proposed must be located within the authorized watershed.
- have been damaged by flooding at least twice within the previous 10 years or at least once in the last 12 months.
- inundated or adversely impacted as a result of a dam breach.
- be privately owned, or owned by state or local units of government.

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